

LANGUAGE

DOCUMENTATION AND DESCRIPTION IN NIGERIA

A festschrift in honour of
Prof. Imelda Icheji Lawrence Udoh
at 60

Edited by:
Ememobong Udoh
Golden Ekpo



Copyright © 2020
Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Uyo & the Authors

ISBN 978-978-985-263-5

All rights reserved.

For further information, contact:
Fruities'

25 Ewet Street, Uyo Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
midacommunications@gmail.com
+2348023746111

Printed in Uyo.

Church Diplomacy and the Documentation of Indigenous Languages in Eastern Nigeria

Uwem Jonah Akpan

Abstract

Diplomacy has been a practice that has been consistently adopted in solving problems and the actualisation of set goals by both state actors and non-state actors even before the advent of the missionary enterprise in Eastern Nigeria. Some diplomatic means, methods and strategies include negotiation, mediation, persuasion, compromise, dialogue, gifts, *et cetera*. The early Christian missionaries who operated in the Eastern part of Nigeria were faced with several challenges including cultural barriers especially that of language, a scenario that adversely affected their bold and irreversible quest to transmit the Gospel to the indigenous people that they served; and thereby expand the frontiers of the missionary enterprise in the region. Consequently, they resorted to “church diplomacy”. This art witnessed the introduction of Western education to raise literate indigenous followers who could read and write in English language and help to advance the course of the Gospel. There was also the deliberate and intensive learning of the indigenous languages by the missionaries, the translation of the Bible into Efik and Ibibio languages, the publication of hymn books, catechism books as well as several related Christian literature in indigenous languages. Undoubtedly, the pioneering efforts of the missionaries apart from enhancing evangelisation and wholesomely expanding the sphere of their influence, profoundly helped in the documentation and preservation of these indigenous languages, particularly Efik and Igbo. It is doubtful if these indigenous languages would have reached their present state of “modernisation” if not for the church diplomacy. The paper adopts a historical narrative methodology.

1. Introduction

The greatest weakness of Nigeria’s cultural nationalists was that they emphasised only the negative results of missionary enterprise on the Nigerian society. However, the Christian missions were more than destroyers; they were builders as well and, to some extent, preservers. Upon the Christian missions evolved the task of preserving the

indigenous language against the wishes of their converts and the indifference of the administrators who preferred the English language. By their efforts, the main languages of Nigeria have been preserved as a legacy to the Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Nupe, Hausa, etc. Indeed, the reduction of these languages into writing has resulted in a linguistic homogeneity that never existed in these "tribes". The importance of this awakening of "tribal" consciousness cannot be overestimated. For instance, the "Union Igbo" into which the Bible was translated in the opening years of the last century, a synthesis of three almost indistinguishable dialects, has become the *Esperanto* of the Igbo, a common vehicle of expression, the language of literature and a bond unifying the third largest "tribe" in West Africa (Ayandele, 1966).

Apart from the linguistic efforts, the supreme importance of Christian missions in the evolution of modern Nigeria lies in the fact that it was upon them almost entirely that the social and moral development of the Nigerian peoples fell in the period ending in 1914. This is not to say that the British administration had no moral purpose for its presence in Nigeria. Nevertheless, until the days of Lugard, the moral purpose of British administration was purely negative (Ayandele, 1966). Nwabueze (2010, p.380) confirms the above assertion by noting that "one of the greatest benefits of civilisation brought to Africa by modern European colonialism is writing, particularly literacy in the two modern languages of learning, English and French and education generally". He adds that "no civilisation, no progress or development, be it in science, technology, industrialisation, architecture, medicine, the science of legislation, philosophy, or even history, is possible among a people unable to read and write in any language. For, writing and literacy lie at the heart of civilisation. Africa is said to have no history, not so much because historical events never occurred in the continent, but because no written records of such events, or of happenings of any sort, existed. The claim that "high civilisations" had flourished in Africa for many millennia is clearly belied by the absence of writing and literacy before the advent of the modern colonialism".

According to Nwabueze (2010), it is really astonishing that, while European countries had invented writing and letters, centuries before Christ, black Africa remained almost totally unlettered and without writing until the advent of colonialism in the 19th century. According to him, "it is illiteracy and the inability to read and write even in his own language, more than European colonialism, that has degraded the personality of the African".

Throughout the history of Christianity, it has been the lot of the church to cultivate the human mind, to educate, to enlighten, to investigate and appreciate the knowledge and wisdom of God in order to make man known and understand his Maker and to serve Him better. It is no cynicism to wonder whether African literature could have evolved at all or blossomed into its present state of excellence without the linguistic medium provided by

the French and the English languages. Such therefore is Nigeria's civilising inheritance from the missionary enterprise in the field of literacy and linguistics (Aye, 1987; Nwabueze, 2010). Indeed, it is against this background that the efforts of the Christian missions in the elevation of the moral intellectual condition of the Nigerian peoples through the documentation and preservation of the indigenous languages can be clearly appreciated.

This paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction, section two defines language and its significance, section three explains the meaning of language documentation within the context of this paper, section four looks at the meaning of church diplomacy, section five discusses the advent of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria, section six examines the contributions of the Presbyterian and Anglican Communion to the documentation of Efik and Igbo languages respectively, while section seven is the conclusion.

2. Definition and Significance of Language

Language is a system of rules in which sound, structure and meaning are integrated for communication. It is one of the most important attributes of mankind. Every normal human being acquires it and uses it creatively and there is no human community without a language. It has been described as the human essence, and the quintessence of humanity, for man has not only been a *homo-sapiens*, but also a *homo-loquens* (i.e. speaking being). The language of a community is therefore, a very vital aspect of the community not only because it uses it to perform all the communicative functions it requires, but because it also serves as an object of identity as well as a repository of the community's culture, history, ethos, philosophies, heroic deeds, exploits, myths and legends (Essien, 1994).

Encyclopedia Britannica defines language as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate. On his part, Lyons (1970) views language as the principal systems of communication used by groups of human beings within the society of which they are members.

Language is a particularly important means of communication between humans. Mr. A can communicate his or her ideas, emotions, beliefs, or feelings to Mr. B as they share a common code that makes up language. No doubt, there are many other means of communication used by human beings, e.g. gestures, nods, winks, flags, smiles, horns, short-hand, Braille alphabet, mathematical symbols, morse, code, sirens, sketches, maps, acting, miming, dancing, and so on. However, all these systems of communication are extremely limited or they too, in turn, depend on language only. They are not as flexible, comprehensive, perfect and extensive as language. Language is so important a form of communication between humans that it is difficult to think of a society without language. It gives shape to people's thoughts and guides and controls their entire activity. It is a carrier

of civilisation and culture as human thoughts and philosophy are conveyed from one generation to the other through the medium of language. Language is ubiquitous in the sense that it is present everywhere in all activities. It is as important as the air one breaths and is the most valuable possession of man. In the scheme of things, all human beings are blessed with languages and it is the specific property of humans only. Language is thus species-specific and species-uniform. It is because of the use of language that human are called “talking animals” - *Homo loquens* (Syal and Jindal, 2014).

3. Language Documentation and its Significance

Language documentation (also known by the term ‘documentary linguistics’) is the sub-field of linguistics that is “concerned with the methods, tools and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties” (Himmelmann, 2006).

Language documentation aims to describe the grammar and use of human languages and to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community. It seeks to create as thorough a record as possible of the speech community for both posterity and language revitalisation. Language documentation provides a firmer foundation for linguistic analysis in that it creates a corpus of materials in the language (<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>).

Language documentation is used in this paper to represent the identification, collation, translation, and preservation of the Efik and Igbo languages of Eastern Nigeria by the Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries.

4. Church Diplomacy

The term diplomacy has been variously defined by scholars in accordance with their worldview. Some scholars interchange diplomacy with foreign policy, some with inter-group relations and others for negotiation, while others regard it as international relations. On their part, Usman and Odeh (2015) conceptualise diplomacy as the “how” of inter-group relations. It is a process through which the business of states in the international system is carried out by officials using appropriate means, methods and strategies that will enhance peace and discourage wars. It is used to reach agreement, compromise or settlement where actors’ objectives are in conflict or competition in the international system (Akpan, 2019).

However, the above definition concerns largely the practice of diplomacy in the field of international politics. Socially and at any level whatsoever, diplomacy is the ordered conduct of relations between one group of human beings and another group whose goals are mutually incompatible (Akpan, 2012). The use of the term “church diplomacy” in the context, aims at bringing to fore, some of the deliberate methods, processes and instruments that were adopted by the missionaries to enable them generate the involvement of the

people in the missionary enterprise and thereby extend the frontiers of Christianity. Some of the methods included negotiation, Western education, persuasion, dialogue, gifts and treaties with the indigenous people of Eastern Nigeria in most cases via the active collaboration with the colonial officials. However, emphasis is paid on the preservation of the indigenous language, through the translation of the Bible, hymn and catechism books as well as related Christian literature, *et cetera*, particularly in Efik and Igbo. It should be noted that the missionaries laboured to learn the indigenous languages and used same as the effective means of communication. It is obvious that though these means and methods were used at the interim to enable them achieve their immediate needs, the legacy has been enduring in the region.

5. The Advent of the Missionary Enterprise in Nigeria

The first move by the Christian missionaries to evangelise Nigeria in the 15th and 16th centuries did not extend to the Eastern part. The move began with the early Portuguese voyage to the West African coasts to establish trade. The missionaries were the Portuguese Catholic and their areas of operation were Warri and Benin. Owing to serious logistic and ecological problems, the mission could not realise its desired objective and therefore fizzled out (Anyabuike, 1996).

The evangelisation of the Eastern states of Nigeria was not an isolated event but very much linked with the 18th century enlightenment and ideological change that swept through Europe and America. Remarkable role was played by the Christians, humanitarians, the French and American revolutions in that they criticised the obnoxious slave trade and preached the brotherhood of man irrespective of race and colour. There was no enduring and successful missionary endeavour in West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular until in the 19th century. Unlike the previous attempts, it was the "Protestants" that took the initiative at this phase. The Roman Catholic joined later. The revival of the missionary enterprise was as a result of new religious and moral awakening. It arose through the "Protestant" countries in Europe and America towards that end of the 18th century. The phenomenon which was strongest in England was known as the "Evangelical Movement" (Adiele, 1996).

The earliest motivators in "Protestant" religious awakening were John Wesley and William Carey. They are regarded as the fathers of modern Missions among the "Protestants". The early Anglican Missionary Societies in Britain were directed towards preaching to the colonists including West Africa. They were the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1649, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1698 and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPGF) in 1701. Others were the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1795 and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1799 and Church of Scotland Mission (Adiele, 1996). Of particular

interest to this study are the Church of Scotland Society (Presbyterian Church) and the Church Missionary Society (Anglican Communion).

The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by the British led to the creation of a permanent homeland for the freed slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Fernando Po (now Equatorial Guinea). It should however be recalled that in their plantations in West Indies, many of those freed slaves had been converted to Christianity. The missionaries therefore followed them to their newfound land for the purpose of which was to continue to instruct them to have roots in Christianity and avoid lapsing into heathenism. In teaching the “returnees”, the Christian missions found it necessary to instruct the freed Africans to be able to read the Bible in their mother tongues. Thus, Freetown and Fernando Po became the earliest homes for Christian missionary activities (Animalu and Ogbuka, 1995).

In September 1842, the Methodist Mission led by Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman made its advent to Nigeria through the coast of Badagry (Famulisi, 1992). The Anglican Communion team led by Rev. Henry Townsend also arrived Badagry in the month of December of the same year (Adiele, 1996). While the Methodists and the Anglican evangelists were consolidating their missionary activities in and around the Western part of Nigeria, the Church of Scotland Mission (Presbyterian) based in Jamaica, West Indies, sent an exploratory mission to Calabar in 1846, led by Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell. Other members of the pioneer team were Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Edgerley, an English printer and his wife; Andrew Chisholm, a Mulatto carpenter; and Edward Miler, a Negro teacher. Their advent followed the request made by King Eyamba V of Duke Town and King Eyo Honesty II of Creek Town for Christian missionaries to be sent to Calabar (Nyong, 1997; Akpan, 2019).

5.1 Presbyterianism and the Documentation of the Efik Language

Within six months from the period of the arrival of the mission company, everything was set for the work of evangelisation of Old Calabar. Schools and churches were established in Duke Town, Creek Town and Old Town. At the beginning of the 1860s, the mission was fortunate to have, among other missionaries, three men of high stature in the field, namely: Revs. Hugh Goldie, William Anderson and Alexander Robb. It was a new era of hope for the Gospel. The church was now getting prepared for the great intellectual awakening.

Rev. Hugh Goldie was first trained as a catechist before he was posted to Jamaica, and in Calabar, he distinguished himself as a teacher and an author. He was outstanding in his keen study of the Bible which he mastered from Genesis to the Revelation. His biographers agree that when he picked his sermon from the beginning of Genesis, he would follow the chapters Sunday after Sunday until he came to the Revelation and would start all over again from Genesis. He studied Efik language so meticulously that he got himself

into the intricacies, mastered its grammar and idioms, and devised its orthography, the last of which was in excellent use in the 19th century and down to the early 20th century (Aye, 1987).

In addition, Rev. Goldie pioneered the translation of the New Testament into Efik in 1862. It is worth stating that it was because of the painstaking effort of Rev. Goldie, in conjunction with Alexander Robb, that the complete Efik Bible came out in 1868. By this development, the Efik Bible was one of the first Bible to be translated into an indigenous language in West Africa. Apart from his translation of the New Testament, Goldie's greatest monument was his *Dictionary of the Efik Language*, a book of considerable volume, detail and very informative. Besides, he wrote many schoolbooks, and it was his scholarship, for the most part, that sustained the mission work and gave it its undying strength and inspiration. Another of his prominent work was *Efik Grammar* (Efik grammar in Efik and Efik grammar in English) in 1974. He was the greatest contributor to the *Efik Hymn* book now still in use in the churches; most of these hymns he translated from the psalms. In addition to these, he also wrote *Calabar and Its Mission*, and *The Memoirs of King Eyo VII*. These works dominated the studies of other missionaries of the 19th century, who produced only translations, primers, readers, hymns and sermons (Aye, 1997; Akpan, 2019).

According to Aye (1987), as a Pastor, he was greatly loved by the people of Creek Town "who called him affectionately - *Etubom Akamba* - the Great Master" On one of the walls of Creek Town Church is a memorial in brass with the following inscriptions:

Erected by the women of this Church in memory of their beloved Pastor the Rev. Hugh Goldie who after nearly 50 years of devoted service in the Mission fell asleep in Jesus on the 18th of August 1895 - Aged 80 years. "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as stars forever and ever". Today, Goldie Street, one of the longest streets in Calabar, stands to his memory. There was also Goldie College in Arochukwu (Aye, 1987, p.90).

Rev. Alexander Robb was another scholar of the mission. He came to Calabar with the express purpose of training indigenous evangelists and pastors for the mission, to assist in translating the Old Testament into Efik and to revise the existing Efik literature. Apart from translating other Bible tracts and literature, in 1868, the printed edition of his translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress- Mbuk Asana Usung Heaven*) into Efik appeared. Aye stresses that one has to read this translation to see the labour and depth of scholarship involved to realise the degree of Rev. Robb's mastery of Efik language in its various ramifications (Aye, 1987).

Also, through the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, several hymns were translated and documented. Substantial contributions were made in the area of Bible tracts

and literature. In 1894, Essien Ukpabio (the first Presbyterian convert) translated into Efik Dr. J.H. Wilson's *The Gospel and Its Fruits* and another publication known as *Tiene Jesus*, while Asuquo Ekanem published a translation of John Bunyan's *Holy War* in Efik. In this area, tribute must be paid to the three "men of high stature in the field" Rev. Huge Goldie, William Anderson, and Alexander Robb (Aye, 1987).

Uya (1987) records that by the first half of the 19th century, it was widely reported that Efik traders kept "an account in writing of all their transactions in business". This early interaction of the Efiks with the Europeans and the development of literacy among them had important consequences both on Efik culture on one hand, and Efik cultural influences in the Cross River region. Firstly, the acquisition of literacy led some Efiks such as William Ndang, Tom Okon Nyamse, E.N. Amaku and E.A. Edyang to produce literary works in Efik which were to become standard reading in the schools established throughout the Cross River region in the first half of the 20th century. The use of Efik as a medium of instruction in schools in the lower grades gave the language a prominence far out of proportion to its original speakers. Indeed, by the end of the first half of the 20th century, the Efik language had emerged and was accepted not only as a medium of instruction but also the language of "civilisation" and "achievement" throughout the region. It was widely spoken all the way up the Cross River into the Cameroon and conservative estimates put the number of its speakers at that time at three million.

In assessing the robust contributions of the Presbyterian Church, Aye (1987) elucidates thus:

Presbyterianism in Nigeria has come to stay, because it has left too many footprints on the sands of time. Several factors contributed to these: first, it was one of the earliest if not the earliest of Christian evangelical bodies fully expressive in the Oil Rivers and the Niger Coast Protectorate; second, it was the first missionary body to introduce the Bible in the Cross and Calabar rivers; third, it was the earliest bearer of the torch of Western education and Christian enlightenment in these parts; fourth, it was the first Christian mission that came out at the direct invitation of the indigenous rulers and so its transplantation was cordial and peaceful. From its womb has come out other indigenous religious and educational institutions that held to reinforce its achievements. Today, rival churches encompass and threaten it; even so, the impressions left by this early bird will ever remain indelible in the history of Nigeria. The educational and religious history of Nigeria would reflect an uneasy vacuum if the activities of the Presbyterian Church were left out (Aye, 1987: 1).

5.2 The Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the Documentation of the Igbo Language

Christianity reached Igbo land in 1857. Sierra Leone, from where most of the missionaries came, had a dynamic and patriotic Igbo community. Through the patriotism of the Sierra Leone Igbo and their compatriots in Fernando Po, Liberia and Gambia, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) responded to an Igbo lobby and founded its Niger Mission. The Igbo in Sierra Leone welcomed the idea of a mission to the Niger and some of them volunteered to go back as evangelists and catechists. Some of them already employed in the Government service in Sierra Leone became enthusiastic that they resigned their jobs in order to make themselves available to go to the Niger (Tasie, 1996).

The most outstanding among the Igbo who joined the staff of the Niger Mission was John Carpenter Taylor, born of Igbo parents in Sierra Leone, educated at Charlotte School and Fourah Bay College, a catechist (had served in the Temneh Mission), schoolmaster in Sierra Leone for years and a Pastor. Although the mission was founded under the auspices of the CMS (an Evangelical Society of the Church of England and for whom therefore the Bible was primal in the promotion of the Christian faith), the actual routine operation of the mission came under Samuel Ajayi Crowther (Tasie, 1996).

Prior to Taylor's work, the recognised authority on Igbo language was the German philologist and missionary James Fredrick Schon. The missionaries started their effort in this direction with the collection of word lists among the freed slaves in Freetown. The CMS plunged into the studies of Igbo language when permission was granted for the establishment of the Niger Mission with headquarters at Onitsha. Tasie (1996) notes that Schon reduced Igbo into writing in 1841. Bishop Crowther had translated a Primer and part of St. Matthew in Nupe, which was edited by the German linguist, Rev. J.F. Schon, also Rev. Taylor translated Igbo reading books and portions of the Scriptures. In 1860, Taylor succeeded in translating the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians and Philemon into *Isuama* (Owerri) dialect of Igbo language (Ross, 1959).

According to Agwubilo (1995), Rev. Crowther, a linguist of proven ability with the help of Simon Jonas (an Igbo ex-slave), published the first book of some worth in Igbo: *The Isuama Igbo Primer*. This book contained the Igbo alphabet, word phrases, sentence patterns, our Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and translation of the first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel. Rev. Crowther devised the first alphabet by modifying the standard alphabet published by Lepsius, a German philologist in 1854, listed hereunder:

A B D E F G H L K M N O P R S T T U V W Y Z (Agwubilo, 1995: 66)

To take care of peculiar sounds in Igbo, Rev. Crowther added the following diagraphs in the Lepsius alphabet and thus was born the celebrated old orthography commonly called the C.M.S. orthography.

GB GH GW KP KW NW NY SH DS (later J) TS (later CH) (Agwubilo, 1995: 67).

Agwubilo (1995) states that only two significant vowel sounds of /i/ and /u/ were missing in the old orthography and their addition in 1961 by "ONWU Committee" settled the age long orthography controversy and the credit for this early success in Igbo studies rightly belonged to the CMS. The CMS missionary team at Onitsha comprising Rev. Crowther (the leader), Simon Jonas and Rev. J.C. Taylor, opened a school headed by a mission teacher, Mr. Romaine. The school primarily taught people how to read and write in Igbo, using the *Isuama Primer* as a textbook. This all-important book was later named *Azu Ndu*.

Right from the inception of their missionary enterprise in Onitsha, *Isuama Igbo* was unquestionably used by the CMS but by the late 1870s, it became obvious that the use of *Isuama* dialect by the CMS in bringing the gospel to the people was in fact a kind of pidgin Igbo, spoken by the freed slaves in Sierra Leone. It had deviated largely from the dialects of the core Igbo and its use in spreading and propagating the Christian faith was scorned by the Igbo people. By the 1880s, the *Isuama Igbo* was waning in popularity and its use in spreading the gospel was no longer attractive (Agwubilo, 1995).

Having laid this foundation of transmitting the message of Christianity to the people as was intended, through their mother tongue, it was left for another great missionary to expand the work so well begun. This time, the lot fell to a young Oxford cleric who answered the call of the Society to serve in this part of the world. He was Rev. H.H. Dobinson, whose service of seven years enabled the Society to carry out the remaining aspects of the Great Commission. In 1893, Rev. Dobinson translated the Bible into the Onitsha dialect of the Igbo language, assisted by one of the most famous converts and missionary (Ross, 1959).

The experiment in using the Onitsha dialect could not succeed because the dialect of Onitsha was peripheral and like its *Isuama* counterpart was not widely spoken in Igbo land. Meanwhile, two young missionaries who were to change the course of historical development of Igbo studies arrived the C.M.S mission at Onitsha. They were English born Thomas J. Dennis and a Sierra Leonean, Henry Johnson. These newcomers were very energetic and before the death of Rev. Crowther in 1891, about 50 books had been published in Igbo through their efforts.

Arch. Thomas J. Dennis is regarded as the pioneer of "the Union Igbo period". Even before the death of the leader of the C.M.S. Mission in Onitsha, Bishop Crowther, *Isuama* and *Onitsha Igbo* were no longer popularly used by the CMS. Arch. Dennis came out in

1893 and was ordained in 1894. He had been acting Vice-Principal of Fourah Bay College, Freetown for about a year and joined the Niger Mission in November 1894. His duties in the Niger were at first mainly administrative. He served as the acting secretary to the mission in 1895 and became substantive secretary after the death of the former secretary, H.H. Dobinson in 1897. He was appointed Archdeacon in 1905. When he joined the Niger Mission in the 1890s, he was disappointed that, among other things, the Niger Mission was not a "Scriptural Mission", because there was no Bible, and also there had been very little Bible translation work (Tasie, 1996).

Tasie (1996) observes that in addition to other challenges, the Igbo language itself presented some difficulties to the missionaries. Igbo is usually classified by linguists as one language, but many dialects, some of which are totally so different that the people speaking one are hardly intelligible to those speaking another dialect. He identifies four dialects to illustrate the point: Isuama (Owerri), Onitsha and Uwana and the dialect spoken in some of the Niger Delta towns especially at Okrika, Bonny and Opobo (intentionally excluding other more controversial dialects such as those spoken by the Ikwerre Ekpohia or Oguta, who sometimes deny that they are Igbo).

In view of these impediments, especially of the multiplicity of dialects, it was for a long time difficult to produce an Igbo Bible. For nearly 50 years after the advent of the missionary enterprise in Igbo land, the Igbo Christians had available to them in indigenous language, only parts of the Bible and when, by the beginning of the 20th century, partly in the interest of the mounting numbers of Christians who understand only the indigenous language, there arose the urgency for Igbo Bible. Those who were concerned about this matter were faced with some fundamental issues, one of which was whether it would be more appropriate to choose the dialect of one single group. If this was followed, the process would have meant all other dialect groups having to learn the dialect that had been selected. This, in effect would have also meant creating one dialect as the language of the Christian religion and imposing it upon all others (Tasie, 1996).

The missionaries were confronted with a dilemma of which dialect they should choose, especially in a circumstance in which each dialect group claimed superiority over others; or were the missionaries to be guided by superiority in number? By 1910, when the issue of producing an Igbo Bible was being seriously considered, Onitsha, the centre of the missionary enterprise in Igbo land, had 2,159 Christians, Owerri area where the missionary efforts started later had 206 Christians. However, in terms of the total population of each area, it was obvious that Owerri area was by far the most densely populated than Onitsha. Indeed, it was evident by 1910 that there were great disproportions of Christians or non-Christian between different Igbo-speaking areas. In one, Christians formed a minority, in another; they formed a sizeable proportion of the population. These dilemmas had to be diplomatically tackled and resolved by the missionaries (Tasie, 1996).

At the end of the day, no dialect was chosen. The first step towards the resolution of the problems was taken at a conference held at Asaba on the 14th of August 1905. Before this time, the translations attempt had been made in separate dialects. The participants at the Asaba Language Conference included representatives of the CMS (operating in Central Niger), the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) (operating in the Niger Delta) and the United Presbyterian Church (operating in the South-East, especially among the Uwan-na-Igbo).

Tasie (1996) notes that prior to this conference, Arch. Dennis had conducted a tour of Igbo-speaking areas to gather firsthand information on the language situation. In the process, he examined the differences and similarities of the Igbo spoken in these areas. His argument was that the best solution to the challenge would be in creating what he called "Union Igbo" which was to be an amalgam of various Igbo dialects "which will meet the needs of the Igbo speaking tribes". This idea was accepted by, especially, the expatriate members of the conference. They regarded it as a solution to the rival Igbo dialects.

The CMS which sponsored the "Union Bible Igbo" idea adopted the suggestion of the Asaba Conference and decided that Arch. Dennis should be set aside to do the translation of the Bible into the Union Igbo. Egbu-Owerri which was centrally located was chosen for the language laboratory. According to Agwubilo (1995), Arch. Dennis was assisted in the difficult but historic task by such eminent Igbo intellectuals as T.D. Anyaegbunam (later Rev. T.D. Anyaegbunam), Isaac Okechukwu Mba, D.O. Pepple (of Bonny) and Alphonsus Onyeabo (later Bishop Onyeabo). Every single word had to be considered, translated from the original Hebrew and Greek, and the word found which would be known and understood by all parts of the Igbo race with its several dialects (Agwubilo, 1995 and Onyemelukwe, 1995).

By 1910, the earlier translation of the Bible into Igbo language was under revision and Inter-Mission Conference had discovered Arch. Dennis a translator of great ability and single-mindedness. He had already been responsible for a Union Igbo New Testament which came out in 1908. He had also by May 1909 started work on the Old Testament and finished it on the 19th of May 1911. There were altogether 3,025 foolscap pages of manuscripts, about 2,500 pages of typed material. After the translation, there was a campaign to get the Union Igbo version accepted (Onyemelukwe, 1995, Tasie, 1996).

In 1913, the Union Igbo Bible was finally produced at a total cost of about 2000, with the British and Foreign Bible Society. By 1917, the acceptance of the Union Igbo Bible version of the Bible was virtually complete. Bishop Tugwell reported to London, on the 12th of December 1919, that 75,000 copies of the Union Igbo Bible and sections of it had been sold since 1913. He paid glowing tribute to Arch. Dennis' achievement and the help given by the British Foreign Bible Society. It was received with great happiness and gratitude everywhere by the Igbo Christians (Onyemelukwe, 1995, Tasie, 1996).

In other areas of Igbo studies, Arch. Dennis made valuable contributions. The Language Committee or Bureau worked under the close supervision of Arch. Dennis and produced the translation of such works as the *Pilgrims Progress*, *Union Reader*, *Ekpere Abu*. In 1916, he revised, reworked and enlarged Julius Spencer's *Elementary Grammar of Igbo*. Consequent upon this revision, the book was in use for a long time. Because of his invaluable contributions to the growth of the church and the development of Igbo language, Arch. Dennis was invited by the Oxford University to receive a conferment on him of an honorary Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in recognition of his services to mankind.

In 1917, while returning home with an Igbo-English Dictionary ready for the press and various other smaller translations, the ship in which Arch. Dennis and his wife Mattie, were sailing was torpedoed outside Queen's own harbour, Ireland by a German marine. Onyemelukwe records that:

After helping his wife into a boat, he himself descended a rope, hand over hand from the sinking ship, into the sea. When the roll was called, hours after, Arch. Dennis was missing. Some days later, a fisherman on the Welsh coast stood watching a case being tossed on the waves. When the tide went down, he went and collected the box containing many sodden manuscripts. It was a great part of the Dictionary and he sent it to Mrs Mattie Dennis. About the same time, a life belt was found in which were Igbo Gospel manuscripts, the last of Arch. Dennis translations (Onyemelukwe, 1995:9).

Later in 1923, a book, *Dictionary of the Ibo Language*, which Arch. Dennis had edited was published. The significance of a dictionary for an emerging standard dialect is very obvious. Viewed from the evangelical perspective, one might argue that Arch. Dennis' contributions were merely to facilitate the spread of the gospel by his church. But the linguistic import of it by far outweighs this narrow consideration. According to Obi (1976), "translation as a linguistic process is a very productive one in the development of many languages and it often serves as a means of enriching the literature of the target language". This view is readily shared. If the tempo of translation started by Arch. Dennis was continued even after his death, some works of literature like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Cyprain Ekwensi's *The Burning Grass*, would have been translated into Igbo and more people would have been inspired to read Igbo texts.

The efforts of Arch. Dennis and his team in fashioning out a standard dialect (the Union Igbo) for the written Igbo is vindicated by the later introduction of the standard Igbo by the academic committee of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture. The present standard Igbo borrows much from the principles enunciated by Arch. Dennis and his language modernising team. Although buffeting credit has not been accorded the work of this genius by the Igbo themselves, obviously Arch. Dennis will forever be remembered

whenever there is a discussion on the acceptable dialect for the written Igbo; and, through the institution named after him – The Dennis memorial Grammar School, Onitsha.

According to Alutu (1995), Arch. Dennis' Igbo Bible translation was widely hailed and accepted unlike William Tyndale's first English version of the Scripture made by direct translation from the original Hebrew and Greek. It was the first English version of the Bible to be printed but it met with bitter opposition. He was accused of willfully perverting the meaning of the Scriptures, and his New Testament copies were ordered to be burnt as "untrue translation". He was finally betrayed into the hands of his enemies, and in October 1536, was publicly executed and burned at stake.

Alutu (1996) adds that the successful translation of the Holy Bible into Igbo by Arch. Dennis compares favourably with the King James Version, published in 1611, as the translators of the King James Version took into account the preceding version, viz: the Great Bible, 1539, the Geneva Bible, 1560 and the Bishop's Bible, 1568. In 1582, a translation of the New Testament made from Latin vulgate by Roman Catholic scholars was published at Rheims. Similarly, the Igbo Bible was translated from the King James' version of the English Bible. The King James Version had to compete with the Geneva Bible in popular use; but in the end it prevailed, and for more than two and half centuries, no other authorised translation of the Bible into English was made. The King James Version became the "Authorised version" (A.V.) of the English-speaking peoples. In the same vein, the Arch. Dennis' translated Igbo Bible was the version in use among all the Igbo-speaking people in Nigeria. From 1910 to 1980, the former translation was solely in use in all churches, homes, gatherings and almost all evangelistic campaigns. Despite the fact that a new translation of the Igbo Bible has been produced, the Arch. Dennis' translation is still in use. The new translation has not gained enough popularity as to warrant doing away with the earlier translation, as the authorised or King James version is still in use alongside the Revised Standard Version, translated in 1952. As the King James Version has with good reason been termed "the noblest monument of the English prose", so is the Igbo Bible, translated by Arch. Dennis has been the "noblest monument of the Igbo prose" (Onyemelukwe, 1995).

In an article written by the Reverend Fredrick W. Dodds of the Primitive Methodist Nigeria Mission, which was reproduced in the *Western Equatorial Africa Church Magazine* for November 1924, and entitled "The Union Ibo Bible and its Influence", the reverend gentleman said that:

As long as Igbo remains a spoken language – and it is numbered among those along the West African coast which seem destined to survive – the influence of that extraordinary man's work will live. Of all who have succeeded in making any impression on Ibo life and thought, Archdeacon Dennis must be counted the

greatest, though one is not unmindful of men like Dr. Baike, Bishop Samuel Crowther, and Bishop Tugwell. Great as their services, Archdeacon Dennis has done greater, in that, out of a very polyglot of dialects, almost as heterogeneous as the Latin tongues of Europe, he has made an *Esperanto* of Ibo that caught on with the masses, thereby giving to this people the third largest of West Africa, a common vehicle and a language of literature, which in turn has widened the tribal consciousness, causing it to feel the throb of its unity and to look with dim-seeing but hopeful eyes to a loftier destiny..." God bless the Union Ibo Bible (Ross, 1959:63).

At present, Igbo language has grown to the standard where it is no longer scorned and castigated by its owners. The language is rightly competing for national recognition and acceptance as one of the official languages alongside its other indigenous counterparts, Hausa and Yoruba. However, it is not generally recognised that it was through the efforts and sacrifices of the Christian "mentors" and the early harbingers of education in Eastern Nigeria that this position had been achieved. In this respect, the contributions of the Anglican to the development of written Igbo with special reference to the development of standard dialect fondly referred to as the Union Igbo, by a CMS missionary of outstanding merit, Arch. Archdeacon Thomas John Dennis has to be acknowledged (Dike, 1957).

6. Conclusion

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was the Premier of the defunct Eastern Region of Nigeria during the centenary celebration of the Niger Mission in 1957, at Onitsha, boldly remarked about the impact of the Anglican Communion thus:

In this connection, I should like to place on record my admiration for, and appreciation of the invaluable services of those missionary men and women who have contributed so unselfishly and devotedly to the development of the religious, educational and social life of our country. Whatever might have been their shortcomings to its critics, Christianity has blazed a brilliant trail in Nigeria. Through its evangelists and missionaries, it has played a leading role in the development of education, health and other social welfare services. Through education it has helped to mould the character of many Nigerians. It is significant the missionaries did not content themselves with urban areas; they also filtered into the highways and byways of the rural communities to bear witness to Christ the son of God (Ross, 1959: 62).

Indeed, the missionary enterprise has recorded significant achievements in Nigeria and its footprints visibly dot the sand of time to the extent that no aspect of Nigerian history can be meaningfully narrated if its contributions are not given prominence. One area that

the missionary enterprise succeeded to recreate, and preserve is in indigenous languages, particularly the Efik and Igbo languages.

It was the responsibility of the Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries to identify collated document the Efik and Igbo languages. In Calabar, Rev. Hugh Goldie stands out for his untiring and unfading contributions to the development of Efik language. He pioneered the translation of the Efik Bible and Efik Dictionary among other scholarly works. Also in Igbo land, Arch Deacon Dennis is remembered for his tremendous contributions to the development of Igbo language especially the “Igbo Union Bible” which has been regarded as the “noblest monument of Igbo prose”. Even though the missionaries were initially interested in the development of the indigenous languages as church diplomatic instrument – particularly to enable them reach the indigenous people primarily for the gospel sake, the idea has however become an enduring legacy in Eastern Nigeria.

References

- Adiele, S.N. (1996). “Historical Background to the Advent of Christianity in the Eastern States of Nigeria”. *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact, 1857-1995*. Aba: Isaeco Press
- Agwubilo, V. (1995). “Arch. T. J. Dennis and the Union Igbo, 1900-1929”. *Proceedings of the Symposium on Archdeacon T.J. Dennis, The D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese (Anglican Communion)*. Animalu, A.O.E. and Ogbaku, C.J. (Eds.). Onitsha: Ucheakonam Foundation (Nig.). Ltd.
- Ajayi, J. (1965). *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891. The Making of a new Elite*. London: Longmans.
- Akpan, O. (2012). “From Chaos to Order: A History of the Changing Phases of Protocol and Precedents in Contemporary Diplomatic Practice”. *African Diplomacy From Earliest Times to 2010. Book of Proceedings. International Conference on Diplomatic History, University of Abuja*.
- Akpan, U. J. (2019). *Akwa Ibom and Her Neighbours: A Study of Regional Diplomacy Since the Pre-colonial Period*. Uyo: Heritage Preservation Foundation.
- Alutu, E.J. (1995). “The Role of Arch. T.J. Dennis in the Advancement of Learning in Igboland”. *Proceedings of the Symposium on Archdeacon T.J. Dennis, The*

D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese (Anglican Communion).

- Aryabuile**, I.D.E. (1996). "The Planting of the Anglican Church in the Eastern States of Nigeria, 1857-1922". *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact, 1857-1995*. Aba: Isaeco Press
- Animalu**, A.O.E. and Ogbaku, C.J. (Eds.). (1995). *Proceedings of the Symposium on Archdeacon T.J. Dennis, The D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese (Anglican Communion)*.
- Aryika**, F. and Chinonyerem, E. (2010). *A Hundred Years of Methodism in Eastern Nigeria (1910-2010)*, Soul Winners Publications.
- Ayandele**, E.A. (1966). *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria. 1842-1914*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Aye**, E.U. (1987). *Presbyterianism in Nigeria*. Calabar: Wusen Press.
- Azikiwe**, N. (1957). "The Brave Who Lived by Faith". *A Public Lecture in Christ Church, Onitsha During the Centenary Celebration of the Anglican Communion*.
- Dike**, K. O. (1957). "The Origins of the Niger Mission". *A Public Lecture in Christ Church, Onitsha During the Centenary Celebration of the Anglican Communion*.
- Ekechi**, F.K. *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914*. London: Frank Cass
- Essien**, O. (1994). "Language". *Akwa Ibom State: The Land of Promise, A Compendium*. Peters, S.W., Iwok, E.R. & Uya, O.E. (Eds.). Lagos: Gabumo Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Ezekwesili**, E. C. (1995). "Arch. T.J. Dennis, D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese". *Proceedings of the Symposium on Archdeacon T.J. Dennis, The D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese (Anglican Communion)*.
- Familusi**, M. M. (1992). *Methodism in Nigeria (1842-1992)*. Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers. Lyon, J. (1970). *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Fleck**, I. (2013). *Bringing Christianity to Nigeria. the Origin and Work of Protestant Missions*. Jos: African Christian Textbooks.
- Himmelmann**, N. P. (2006). Language Documentation: What is it and what is it good for? *Essentials of Language Documentation*. (Eds) J. Gippert, N. P. Himmelmann & U. Mosel. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Kalu, O. U. (Ed.) (1980). *The History of Christianity in West Africa*. London: Longman
- Kalu, O. U. (1996). *A Century and half of Presbyterian Witness in Nigeria, 1846-1966*. Lagos: Ida-Ivory Press.
- Nwabara, S. N. *Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860-1960*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Nyon, E.A. (1997). *Duke Town School Calabar, 1846-1995. A History of a Missionary Founded Institution*. Calabar: Modern Business Press.
- Nwabueze, B. (2010). *Colonialism in Africa: Ancient and Modern. Vol. 2, Africa's Inheritance From Colonialism*. Ibadan: Gold Press Ltd.
- Okeke, D.C. (1995). "Arch. T.J. Dennis Factor in the Evangelisation of Igboland". *Proceedings of the Symposium on Archdeacon T.J. Dennis, The D.M.G.S. and the Niger Diocese (Anglican Communion)*.
- Ross, P.J. *It is Marvelous in Our Eyes. An Account of the celebrations in Connection with the centenary of the Niger Mission of the Church Missionary Society*. Lagos, 1957.
- Syal, P. and Jindal, D (2014). *An Introduction to Linguistics. Language, Grammar and Semantics*. Ludhiana: Asoke K. Ghosh.
- Tasie, G.O.M. (1996). "Igbo Bible and the Evolution of the Union Igbo, 1905-1913". *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact, 1857-1995*.
- Udo, E. A. (1983). *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers Ltd.
- Usman, A. and Odeh G. (2015). "When Contacts is not Enough: Issues Arising from a Century of Inter-group Relations in Nigeria". *POLAC International Journal of Humanities and Security Studies. Maiden Edition*.
- Uya, O. E. (1987). "Historical Trends in the Cultural Development of Nigeria, with Particular Reference to the Cross River State". *Cultural Development and Nation Building. The Nigerian Scene as Perceived from the Cross River State. Publication of the Academic Proceedings of the First Cultural Week of the University of Cross River State*, Uyo. Uno, S.O. (Ed.). Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>.

